

DEATH AND ITS MEANING

BY
N. SRI RAM

THE THEOSOPHICAL PUBLISHING HOUSE

ADYAR, MADRAS 20, INDIA

1959

DEATH AND ITS MEANING

BY
N. SRI RAM

THE THEOSOPHICAL PUBLISHING HOUSE

ADYAR, MADRAS 20, INDIA

1959

Sold by
The Theosophical Press
Wheaton, Illinois

© The Theosophical Publishing House, 1959

Reprinted from *The Theosophist*, November 1959

PRINTED IN INDIA

At the Vasanta Press, The Theosophical Society,
Adyar, Madras 20.

DEATH AND ITS MEANING

BY N. SRI RAM

THE subject of death and its meaning is obviously one that directly concerns all of us. But far from being approached coolly and rationally, it has been surrounded with so many ideas which are really the projection of our fears and have no logical basis in the truth about ourselves as we may know it while we are living.

“Men fear death,” said Lord Bacon, “as children fear the dark.” Being an event not experienced by us while we are living, the nature of it is unknown, but is it because it is unknown that we fear it? The mind cannot react to what is unknown, to what is non-existent to it, in any way, unless it puts in the place of the unknown something that is known, that is, from our past experience,

A lecture delivered at the last Adyar Convention.

and there must be a reason for our doing so. We already have fears developed in our minds from various experiences, and we project these fears on to the event which is going to take place. Not only children but even some adults fear the dark, because some quarter of our minds is peopled with objects of fear, ghosts, thieves and what not. We are afraid we may be hurt. So when we go out into the dark, where there is not the reassurance of the familiar in which we normally take refuge, some of these images tend to precipitate into a semi-reality. If the condition of fear were not already there, would we fear something that is entirely new and unknown? There are some remarkable species in Nature which approach man, whom they do not know, fearlessly and quietly, even when he advances to kill them.

Death has been called the King of Terrors and given various other names. Amongst some people the event is surrounded by barbaric pomp, wails, breast-beating, and so on, and by others covered with a pall of mournful silence. All this of course only depicts the reactions of those who view it and are affected

by it. We regard it with fear and repulsion because it breaks that continuity which is established in our lives, the continuity of our dependance on so many things which make up the life. Yet if we consider it simply and quietly, putting aside the ideas that have been superimposed on our minds, is it not actually a phenomenon which is as natural as birth? It is taking place all the time around us, everywhere, in one form or another. The leaves fall from the trees and fresh leaves spring in their places. The cells of the body die by the million and new cells are manufactured and take their places. Every form of life perishes and yields place to a new. So universal, natural and apparently necessary a phenomenon cannot be devoid of a deep significance. If we can understand that significance, perhaps our attitude towards it will be modified somewhat. But to do so we must approach it without trepidation, in a cool, relaxed, agreeable spirit, putting aside every superstition, every popular or religious idea that befogs our minds, and also any unwillingness to look at it in its face. Each one of us thinks of death as an event which will occur to him

at a particular time, and most people do not like to think of it at all. Yet it forces itself upon us because it is so dramatic and makes so much of a change. Life exists in the midst of death. In any living body it exists as a whole aloof from the processes of the body. Look at any living form, whether an animal, a tree or a human being. There are always in that form forces which build up and forces which cause disintegration and decline. These two sets of forces are interwoven in the living entity and operate simultaneously. Even in a little child, which seems to grow moment by moment, there is the metabolism of breaking up and building. As it grows, the balance is slanted the other way, and in old age the forces of decline prevail over the forces of growth. If you look at a human body and think of the forces which are uprising there all the time, building up and sustaining the various organs and organisms, you can picture them as a fountain playing up the waters of life. But if you look at the forces which are bringing down everything, causing decline, they are like a downrushing

cascade, falling by a natural gravitation to the earth.

No form lasts for ever. As the Lord Buddha said, all that is compounded must in time be un-compounded. Is there any form, however tiny, which is not compounded? Even the atom has a structure sustained by the forces within itself. Every cell is a compound, and when He said all things that are compounded must come to an end, that applies not merely to physical things, but also to us as mental beings compounded of ideas formed by ourselves or absorbed from other sources. Everything that has arisen in time has to fall apart, that is, be reduced to the original state. Only that which is absolutely simple can exist for ever. We may apply this self-evident truth to ourselves in our various aspects.

What is simple? Surely not our body, nor our mind; nothing which is differentiated can be called simple. What *is* simple is alone the one universal, self-existent Spirit which is postulated in Hindu philosophy, to which H. P. Blavatsky constantly refers in *The Secret Doctrine* as united with the universal basis of

matter; not matter which has been differentiated, modified and built up in various ways, though there may be a ray from that Spirit in forms of such matter, but with Matter in its primordial homogeneity, out of which all that is heterogeneous has come. We may regard Matter and Spirit as the two aspects of a unity which is not subject to death or decay.

Our late President, Dr. Annie Besant, was very fond of quoting from the *Bhagavad Gītā* those splendid verses which speak of the Ātman, the one eternal Spirit which breathes its life into everything, into every form, and yet is untouched by the phenomena which affect that form:

He is not born, nor doth he die; nor having been, ceaseth he any more to be; unborn, perpetual, eternal and ancient, he is not slain when the body is slaughtered.

The whole of the second chapter of the *Gītā* is devoted to death and immortality: death of the body, immortality of the Spirit.

We can never understand the phenomenon of death, its function and usefulness, except in relation to life. Life and death are like the two sides of the same coin. The form exists for the indwelling life, but every form is

subject to disintegration and death, though even in death there is the life of the component elements, let loose in disarray, without the wholeness of the larger life.

It is by the death of the existing forms that Nature is able to move forward to other and better forms. Better in what way? Better for the evolution of life, the implementation of its purpose, the unfoldment of its faculties, the bringing out of the riches that are within itself. There is all the time the ascent of life from rung to rung of a ladder, the end of which we do not perceive. Each form gives way to a fresh form in order that life may move upwards. But each form is subject to decline, and so far as forms are concerned, it is decline which prevails. Therefore, we may imagine form mounted upon form in a series, each superior to the form upon which it rests and from which it is derived. But even as each gives way and tumbles to the ground, the invincible Spirit, the life, rises upwards to the top. I am reminded of the extraordinary phenomenon of salmon moving up a waterfall by a series of leaps, using the falling water itself as a spring-board for its leaps.

There was a time when the transmission of life was by fission, but there is this disadvantage in that method, that the nature of the old is carried forward into the new without the freshness of a break. When there is death of the form, there is the possibility of a completely new start with a new form, even though there are the factors of heredity that make for a continuity with modifications. We can see that the child is different from the father and the mother. It starts its race anew, even though it has its physical heredity and also, according to the occult view, a heredity which is psychic or mental, derived from the same individuality as it existed previously in another body.

It may be thought: There is obviously the continuity of life as a whole, and more than that, its progression. But what of the individual—you and me? Does each life flow as a separate stream, do we pass through the gateway of death, and if so, what passes and whither do we go? The more Nature has been studied, the more does it appear that in its highest forms every manifestation of life is in some way unique, that is to say, it is

distinct and different from others, with an individuality of its own, and this individuality must itself be an evolution by a continuous process isolated from others. The speculations, affirmations and intuitions of the greatest philosophers, of the most profound minds of all ages, agree on the theory or fact of the continuity of the individual human life, a continuity which is unbroken by death, but carried on by other means at another level. If we admit the existence of other levels related to that which we can perceive, then the continuity, which seems to be a universal rule, might hold good in different ways for each distinctive stream of life, each individual man being one of such streams.

It is not fanciful to think that life is a flow or movement, as Bergson has tried to explain, and as the stream passes through form after form, some of the experiences that come to it are impressed upon the stream, its waters are colored in some way by those experiences, and though some of the coloring may be precipitated from the waters so that the water becomes clear of them, it is conceivable that some of the characteristics may become so

mingled with the current that they continue with the stream and become for the time being the stream itself. Thus the individuality continues, remaining the same, yet becoming other, in Plato's phrase. The flow or continuity is of each single stream, which remains as a distinct stream because of its individuality.

In the case of a man this is really another way of expressing the truth, let me call it, with which we are all acquainted, namely, the survival of man, the final survival of some nature in him or aspect of him which is the essential part of himself; we might call it the soul.

Both in Hindu philosophy and in Theosophy there is to be found this view, that while there is death for the body, and deathlessness for the Spirit, which is universal and yet individual, being in each separate thing, in between there is the individual life, a consciousness, from which there is a periodic flux and reflux, an advance and a withdrawal, which is governed both by the attraction of the Spirit, which is the life-star, and by the forces of matter. There is the deployment of consciousness, an advance into external conditions, which is

followed by a withdrawal, the contraction of that expanded consciousness and its concentration at a point where it becomes unmanifest to us. This is a phenomenon of recurrence or repetition, of which we see so many instances in Nature, in other words, reincarnation. Birth and death are but movements outwards and inwards. The forthgoing and the withdrawal are like waking and sleeping. Life swings between birth and death not once but many times, so long as the pendulum is moved by the mainspring which is wound in the very processes of living.

If we regard man as a conscious being, which he obviously is, not the body he wears, his individuality is of the very nature of life and consciousness. Along with life and consciousness, if there is in him, as in all other things, the presence of the self-existent Spirit—or the Ātman as a purely subjective reality, not just imagined—then it is conceivable that there can be a process of assimilation of the consciousness as it is purified and refined to the nature of this reality—that aspect of the human consciousness which is colored by that nature, charged and impregnated by it,

becoming an expression of the Spirit, an immortal soul, while all else in that consciousness being alien to its nature is dropped and gone. Out of all the modifications of the human consciousness, out of all its experiences, only such can be "built" into the soul as can conform to the Spirit as it exists in him, thus becoming a manifestation of its nature. In reality it can be no building, but only an awakening of what there is already.

From this point of view, if death is but an incident, the form but an evanescent dwelling-place, a stepping-stone to others, then it may be that the shuffling off of the mortal coil is in reality an advantage. May it not reasonably be held that the laying aside of this coat of flesh and the passions that belong to it is a release rather than a disadvantage, from the soul's point of view? Plato at least thought that only when the soul is free from the trammels of the body it can realize its highest nature.

Let us consider what may possibly happen when the body dies. The mere physical expiry, apart from any precedent conditions due to disease, is not, according to such

evidence as there is, a particularly difficult experience. In life there is the deployment of the consciousness (along with his nature and tendencies) which for the time is the man. At death, and beginning even before it, there is a process of withdrawal. The faculties function less and less, until there comes the point of extinction at which we say the man is dead. But is this contraction a final extinction, or is it a concentration for re-deployment in other conditions? The contraction may be due merely to the failure of the instrument. After all, our minds are based upon the body at present, and while in that condition they are dependent on the body to a considerable extent, so much so that in the last century at any rate, among scientists and free-thinkers, the view was held that all mental processes were merely an epiphenomenon, the effect of bodily processes.

But if we regard life as essentially independent of the body we wear, then the failure of the instrument cannot spell either its extinction or the extinction of the faculties belonging to it. The individual as a mental being can pass into a different state. If the conditions

there are such that it is possible for the consciousness once again to be active along with its habits, tendencies and capacities, then death is but a portal, and what follows the death of the body may be quite a different experience from the annihilation which it is on the physical side of the event. There is the same consciousness, with its emotions and urges, the impressions it has received, the images it has formed, and all the reactions still in its memory. The consciousness of any one of us is not just a state of pure awareness, it is a consciousness which has been moulded in a particular way, it has a memory charged with certain images, it has developed certain tendencies and inclinations. In other words, it has become structured in some manner, not in most cases like some beautiful piece of architecture, but variously balanced and compounded of diverse material. The substance or the mind-stuff of which different minds are constructed may be regarded as essentially the same, but each one of us becomes inwardly moulded in his own way, just as physically he assumes a certain expression, develops a certain figure and manner which become pronounced

as the years pass and make him look very different from others.

The images which are carried over must tend to fade because of no further contact with the scenes which in the first instance caused those images. I am here, I look at the trees, at the Headquarters building and friends. I have the images of all these in my mind, but suppose I go far away somewhere. I will remember this place and the people very clearly for a time, but afterwards they will tend to fade from my mind. As all our mental images are kept alive by renewed contact, most of them must drop away after a time when the contacts are no more. This is a matter of ordinary experience. So, when the individual entity, the conscious being, has moved away from the scenes by which his whole mind has been moulded, the tendency would be, first, for these scenes to fade out of his consciousness, and then for various tendencies to disappear, at least for their activities to cease, because of lack of scope and lack of stimulus.

For instance, a person may be addicted to drink. Even while he is in the physical

world, if he is unable to obtain the drink he will at first feel a certain uneasiness and even be unhappy. But suppose for months or even years he has to live in conditions in which he cannot indulge his desire. He will find that the desire falls away from him completely, he would cease to want to drink, not because the craving has gone completely from his blood—for put again in conditions where he can have a drink, it will start again—but because of lack of means and the gradual fading out of thoughts with regard to it.

May not something similar happen to the individual consciousness which has passed on into a region where there is the continuance of desire, but not any physical means to obtain satisfaction? The entity, being removed from conditions with which he has been in rapport, to which he has been reacting, will naturally tend to become more withdrawn and live in a world of his own. When there is nothing which makes demands on our attention and keeps us alert, we tend to go to sleep or to day-dream. The after-death state must be akin to sleeping and dreaming, being a state

of withdrawal in which the conscious Ego is limited and enclosed by its own ideas, as we are in sleep, also with vivid experiences, as in dreams. The famous words, "Death, and his sister Sleep" show how a poet can intuit a truth of which he himself may not know the logical basis.

At death we enter into a state of withdrawal into ourselves, a kind of involution in which we may well have very real experiences comparable to those in dreams. The material for our dreams is what we have collected during the waking hours, but it is re-hashed, often in a fanciful manner, with various images from different quarters fused together, and events happening in a way they do not happen here. But all this is accepted in the dreaming state because the consciousness is not awake and alert and does not see the discrepancy between the actualities of our objective state and the fantasy in which it is indulging for the time.

But we would probably be quite mistaken if we assigned to the conditions of the after-death state the same sort of subjectivity that belongs to our dreams, which are to a large extent

dependent on the conditions of the brain to which the consciousness is tied. But just as our dreams are in some way the working out of the emotions and material accumulated during the waking period, so the after-death state must be based upon the material gathered during the preceding life, and when this material is exhausted, inevitably the dreamer or sleeper must fall into a state of deep sleep in which there is no dreaming, deep sleep here meaning a state of consciousness in which whatever happens is not remembered afterwards. It may be that there are mysteries of sleep, as well as of the after-death condition, but they must be mysteries not in the sense of anything irrational or unrelated to other aspects of our existence, but because we do not understand the processes of our consciousness, its different states and conditions.

During our waking hours our emotions, feelings and ideas of different sorts are all mixed up together, but in the comparatively passive state which supervenes after death, these might well fall into different layers, so that some are worked out first and some later. We may regard the deep sleep as the state of

consciousness which is not based on the earthly events, but a state which is purely spiritual and detached.

In Theosophical books there are detailed descriptions of the after-death states, but they are all in some manner akin to dreaming. What is described seems to me generally to accord with such conceptions as we may form from a common-sense study of our own make-up.

Then comes rebirth. One is often asked, especially in Western countries: Why is the individual born again? Perhaps we might give this answer: You will be born next time for the same reasons for which you were born this time. In a scientific view, nothing can happen except as a result of forces which operate to produce the result. There have been obviously forces pertaining to the conscious being—which must be presumed to exist before birth, if we are not to regard it as a product of the body—through the impulsion of which we were brought into incarnation this time. So long as these forces continue to operate we must come into a body again. Everywhere in Nature there is repetition, and reincarnation is really a repetitive process.

Desire is repetitive. When there is desire, one seeks satisfaction for it. With satisfaction the desire ends, but soon afterwards it is reborn; the satisfaction lasts only for a time, and the desire starts up again. There is here a certain compulsion, and so long as the desire exists in our nature, it must produce over and over again the self-same result. Perhaps it is the thirst for experience which brings us into earthly conditions.

We come back to a new physical body without any previous memory. Nothing remains of the old story, the old personality is gone, and we come back washed clean by the waters of Lethe. We do not remember our past, and we may be glad that we do not. If we were to be burdened with all the things that happened to us in the past, what we had been and what we had done, our present life would be a nightmare. But each time we begin not as the old entity but as a practically new person. "Our life is but a sleep and a forgetting." We have lived before, we have slept through an interval, and we come back new, having forgotten everything. It is a wonderful thing to happen. We come back

as a sweet innocent child, to begin a new chapter, to write in new characters a better story, with more sense and more beautiful sentences.

It may be that the child has arisen out of that old man long dead and gone, but here is the child with a fresh opportunity to develop a better personality and live a better life. But what happens? Watch the same person and see how he deteriorates and after some years becomes unrecognizable, shows characteristics which one could not have suspected to be there in the child. This is because we bring the seeds of our past with us; just as in physical heredity the genes transmit the physical characteristics, so the seeds from the past personality, the old tree, good or bad, are transmitted, but they do not grow unless or until they find an appropriate soil. The old tendencies may be still there, but until provoked and wakened up they remain asleep. That is why a favorable environment is so necessary for a child. But unfortunately the new becomes a copy of the old, a modified copy, but essentially a reproduction and a re-assertion of the old.

What does this mean? It only means we have not died enough. We as a psychological entity, as a psychic compound, have not been completely dissolved, and therefore bring something of yesterday's milk by which the fresh milk of today's experiences is immediately soured. The pure milk that can sustain the soul is soured by the vitiating elements carried over from one life to the next.

The liberated man, who is perfect, is called *Asekha*, which means "with nothing remaining". He does not carry anything over, he has settled his account and in his inner nature is fresh and pure all the time. If we can die completely as a psychic entity—the physical entity is only the body with which we are temporarily linked—so that our nature is reduced to a pure simplicity, the original nature, then there will be a newness that will be a joy for ever. That, I believe, is how the Masters live Their lives. Along with Their wisdom and maturity They retain the innocence, freshness, and sensitivity of childhood and youth. All the seasons are mixed and blended in Them to make life perfect.

How can the seeds of the old tendencies, so die-hard in their nature, be completely destroyed? They cannot be brought to an end by Nature's mechanical action, because it is the nature of things under "the blind laws" of matter to continue as they are, to perform the same old motions. The hard core of ourselves, formed of those tendencies, can be dissolved only when it is brought out of the darkness in which it flourishes into the objective light of a pure awareness in which the truth about it is fully exposed to the perceiving intelligence. The motives and aims of the self can then be seen clearly in their true character. In a serene and passionless state, where there is nothing to hinder one's perceptions, all things can be comprehended as they are, and all things that do not belong to that state must drop away by themselves.

It may be asked: Death may be for us the means of renewal, but what about separation from those whom we love, to whom we are attached? It is very natural to miss those who have become part of our lives when we are parted from them; yet if our love can be deep enough to give us a sense of the underlying

unity—to be deep it has to be absolutely unselfish—then perhaps even the sorrow will be transmuted into a feeling of greater nearness.

It may be that our love for somebody, which derives its character from a certain relationship and particular circumstances, has to be put into different crucibles in order to become perfect, to make it possible for other aspects of that perfection to be brought out. Perhaps even while we are physically together we are not as one really as we might imagine. Each is separated from others by a wall. We have to unravel the mystery of the separation, how it arises, what it is meant to teach. We are not one physically nor one in our minds, but we may be one if we go beyond the mind. We love our friends while we are together, but if this love is pure it will be present even when we are apart. In our best moments, when we see something very beautiful in a person, see into his soul in some degree, there is a feeling in us that becomes deeply one with that beauty or with the nature of that soul. Such a feeling, belonging to the inner nature of ourselves, must prevail over lesser feelings.

In love that wants nothing for itself there can be no shadow of separateness. If we can realize that death is a matter of time and there is unity only beyond the processes of time, we may look upon death with kindly eyes, as upon a friend.
